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Blueprint for water revealed

**The CalFed agreement, if implemented, would address increased storage
and repairs to damaged fish and wildlife habitat**

SACRAMENTO -- Gov. Gray Davis and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt unveiled a sweeping and unprecedented agreement Friday that they said would shape California's economy and environment for decades to come.

If the historic agreement is implemented, it would amount to the most complex effort ever undertaken to repair damaged fish and wildlife habitat, while simultaneously ushering in the state's most ambitious water storage initiative since the dam-building heyday of the 1950s and 60s.

"Today, California is launching the largest and most comprehensive water program in the world," said the governor during a noon speech at the Capitol.

"We're unveiling today a blueprint which will chart California's course for the next 30 years."

The CalFed agreement announced Friday would cost \$8.5 billion over the next seven years. But that's just the beginning, and state and federal officials have not calculated what the total cost of the project would reach when it is finally completed 30 years from now.

The agreement aims to stabilize water supplies for one of the most productive agricultural valleys in the world and the 22 million Californians from the Bay Area to Los Angeles who rely on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta system for drinking water.

At the same time, it seeks to repair damaged fish and wildlife habitat in the 738,000-acre Delta and restore salmon and smelt fisheries that have been decimated over the past 150 years, first by sediment loading that was caused by hydraulic mining in the Sierra and more recently by massive pumping in the southern Delta to divert what would be Bay- and ocean-bound water to the Central Valley and Southern California.

The plan was greeted mostly with cautious optimism, although some farmers and environmentalists expressed reservations.

By signing on to the 50-page agreement, Davis and Babbitt hope to bring an end in California to continuing conflicts over the most precious and irreplaceable resource in the West: water.

Included in the final agreement are eight water storage facilities to be built or studied; a \$1 billion habitat restoration effort; dedicating 380,000 acre-feet of additional water for fish habitat; guarantees that farmers and Southern California water users would not see further reductions in their supply; and an ambitious \$1 billion water conservation program.

The project proposes expansion of Los Vaqueros Reservoir in East Contra Costa County and leaves open the possibility of a controversial northern Delta water diversion that critics believe could be the first leg of a so-called Peripheral Canal -- a plan to take fresh water around the Delta to deliver it more cleanly to points south.

Environmentalists are opposed to the concept because it takes water from the Delta and could cause fish migration problems. Some Bay Area utilities are opposed because they contend water quality in the Delta would suffer.

Officials said the controversial idea remains an option in case the agreement's other measures prove insufficient.

"We have to have a fail-safe fallback plan in case we fail," state Resources Secretary Mary Nichols said in an interview.

As California's population has grown -- from 16 million when dams were being built in 1960 to 34 million today -- the pressure on the Delta water supply has reached the breaking point.

Booming cities are growing thirstier. Fish such as salmon, smelt, steelhead and splittail are being added to endangered species lists, while farmers are complaining that water to keep those fish alive is being taken from them.

And the problem has promised to get only worse. Demographers expect the state's population to hit 59 million by 2040.

"This plan is balanced and includes the tough decisions that had to be made," Davis said. "We're on a collision course with fragile and finite resources if we don't act now."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein called for swift action to build the dams and reservoirs proposed in the plan.

"Without vigorously moving ahead (on water storage projects), this plan cannot meet its goals," said Feinstein.

In an interview, Babbitt said that without such an agreement California not only faces water shortages and environmental crisis, but the lack of a comprehensive water solution could affect the state's ability to borrow money.

"There is a not a certain economic future for this state," he said.

Friday's announcement signifies only that state and federal officials have agreed on the plan's outline. Next, they will craft a more detailed decision notice, which will be followed by environmental analyses of each of the program's elements.

Those documents are sure to be heavily scrutinized by cities, farm districts and environmentalists, and it is possible that elements of the plan will end up in court.

But after decades of conflict between farmers, cities and environmentalists; between Northern Californians and Southern Californians; and between the state and federal government, Davis and Babbitt were preaching cooperation and compromise.

"We've established a new culture here," Babbitt said. "We can do it, but we can only do it together."

The broad outline of the plan was met with qualified support from most quarters.

"There are some things in the plan that we find are a real step forward," said Barry Nelson, a policy analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Daniel Errotabere, a Fresno-area farmer, said he hoped the agreement signaled the end of annual water shortages. He said environmental constraints have limited growers like him in the Westlands Water District to only 60 percent of their contracted amount of water, even though it was a good water year.

"When you get everybody to agree there's a problem, and agree that agriculture is taking too much of the hit, I think that's a good thing," he said.

"If I have concerns, it's whether it fulfills its promise," Errotabere said.

Not everybody is happy, though.

"This is a political solution in lieu of a scientifically defensible solution," said Bill Jennings, director of the environmental group DeltaKeeper.

Jennings said that engineering solutions to the Delta's water quality and fishery problems have failed every time they have been tried, and that the CalFed agreement relies too heavily on such solutions.

"All of a sudden, we're going to find the technological genie to extricate us from all these problems? I don't think so," he said.

Alex Hildebrand, a Delta farmer who grows wheat and corn on 150 acres near Manteca, said the agreement will not solve the problems he has with pumps to the south that drain his canals dry.

"It would be an absolute disaster," he said.

Among the program's features is a proposal to expand Los Vaqueros Reservoir, which was completed just two years ago at a cost to Contra Costa Water District consumers of \$450 million. Such a project would be subject to approval by the district's voters, according to the agreement.

Asked about the likelihood of succeeding on such a vote, Nichols, the resources secretary, said the campaign has not yet begun.

"We haven't made the case yet," she said. "There are real benefits."